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SUBJECT: ASSISTANT SECRETARY NORIEGA ADDRESSES DOMINICAN
CONGRESS

11. Summary. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA) Roger Noriega addressed a joint meeting of the Dominican Congress on December 10 in the Senate chamber. He urged congressional representatives to act quickly on a 2004 budget and he laid out U.S. views on the pending Article 98 agreement, on trafficking in persons, and on free trade agreements. Noriega concluded his historic address with a call for Dominican institutions to protect the public and to prosecute bank fraud. Press commentary and English text of speech are given below. End summary.

12. On December 10 during a 24-hour visit to Santo Domingo, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA) Roger Noriega addressed a joint meeting of the Dominican Senate and House of Representatives. He called on the elected representatives to assume their responsibilities by considering and quickly passing a 2004 budget to be presented by the GODR in connection with IMF negotiations. He praised and thanked Dominican troops supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom, asked congress to ratify the Article 98 agreement as soon as it is presented by the Executive, and advised them of sanctions in U.S. law for countries which do not enforce legislation against trafficking in persons. He stressed that the United States shares the Dominican people's interest in free and fair elections and he outlined advantages of free trade agreements, both bilateral and in the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

12. Noriega expressed the sympathy of the United States for Dominicans in their current economic difficulty, commenting, "There are no easy solutions for deep-rooted problems and there are no shortcuts to lasting recovery." He called upon all sectors of public opinion and economic activity to share the responsibility of finding a sustainable economic program, which "will require sacrifice and tough decisions." He reminded congressional representatives, "There is no greater honor for any elected leader than putting the national interest above his own."

13. The Assistant Secretary rejected pessimism and cynicism, reminding listeners that although finances of the Dominican economy are in "profound disorder," the country's productive capacity is intact, Dominicans are hard working, and they want to see laws and regulations respected. He called explicitly for full prosecution of bank fraud cases now in the Dominican justice system. "These cases are too important.

All of us who respect and admire the Dominican people are watching -- and expecting to see the people well served and protected by their institutions and by their elected officials."

COMMENT

14. This was a memorable and vivid event. Noriega spoke in Spanish, standing at a long table on the dais of the Senate chamber, accompanied by the presidents of both houses and by the Ambassador. The live wall of press cameras caught the drama of his stance before the golden mural dominating the Senate chamber. The chamber was full. Images carried in the broadcast media that evening played up the drama of the setting.

15. Some print journalists later tried to elicit complaints from various political leaders about "U.S. interference" in this event and the Noriega visit, but no one was buying that line. President of the House of Representatives rejected the word and commented that the United States had asked for the venue as a way to speak directly to the Dominican people through its representatives, "the authentic voices of the people." Speaking separately, spokesmen of all three major parties flatly objected to the journalists' characterizations and replied that Noriega was demonstrating the non-partisan stance of the U.S. in favor of democracy. "Man in the street" interviews by one paper found three passers-by willing to agree that U.S. action was, in fact, interference -- and that it was a good thing, because Dominican politicians needed to hear the messages.

16. The first editorial comment has been favorable.

- - The lead editorial in the GODR-owned Listin Diario of December 12 highlighted its key sentence, "If right now the North Americans are interested in getting to know our difficulties in depth, there is nothing bad about that, especially since not a few critics of White House policy accuse it of neglecting U.S. neighbors in Latin America in favor of events in the Middle East."

- -In "El Caribe," commentator Flavio Dario Espinal noted that the Republic has not received such high-level attention from U.S. administrations since 1994, and he stressed the political message: "It is no coincidence that Assistant Secretary Noriega placed such emphasis not only in free and

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transparent elections but also in the need for election observers, for which he pledged U.S. support. . . (the message) shows that even though the Bush administration values the support of the Dominican administration, it places equal importance on political stability and a regular electoral process, especially in the context of a region already suffering from too many political conflicts and crises of governability."

- - PLD-inclined "Hoy" has not yet published a substantive op-ed piece on the Noriega visit, although on the first day of the visit it carried praise of the Ambassador for his impartial handling of the political parties regarding the elections. "Hoy" counterweighted that stance the next day with one cranky paragraph on Noriega subtitled "How Times Have Changed!" in a column of political tidbits. The writer noted the positions of the three parties on the visit as "an unusual convergence of views" about the Assistant Secretary's appearance in Congress, "unprecedented, as far as we know, in our legislative history. But so goes the world, so think our politicians, and some people say that it is all the fault of globalization. And it probably is, who knows, but it would have been preferable, and much less embarrassing, to offer Mr. Noriega another setting in which to take the liberty of pushing his imperial reprimand into our faces."

- - The same page of "Hoy" featured "Cocktail Talk," a satirical series written in pseudo-popular jargon. Excerpts:

"So, Joe, we want the United States to save us, help us out, either directly or through those international credit organisms, from this hole we got ourselves into. Okay, so if we are looking for that, we can't complain if they, with all the good reasons in the world, try to tell us what to do. And all that before the next explosion of the European National Bomb (note: European Union Ambassador Miguel Amado), hotter than hell, who won't give us a nickle unless we cut ourselves in two. . . Noriega's position about that dirty work on bank fraud isn't new. When somebody tried unofficially to get some contingency funds out of the Yankee Treasury to deal with the hole, they told us straight out that the U.S. taxpayers weren't going to pay the bill for anybody's larceny. . . We can't exactly get huffy if Noriega is telling us that our economy is in a profound disorder. You think maybe it ain't so? Or that the economy, the way it stands, is a healthy little thing? That's no news, either. And with the business about electoral transparency, the North Americans aren't getting their powder wet, either. That's what Dr. Joaquin Balaguer thought, that they were bluffing back in 1978 after they sent down their best fast-ball pitchers back then, Andrew Young and Terence Todman. And we all know what happened then, even if that slippery ole Doctor, no dummy himself, hijacked the Senate for his project (note: Balaguer lost the presidency in a free and fair election). And so the Yankees are gonna maintain their relations with whoever wins clean elections next year -- why shouldn't they? Ain't the three big boys in the major parties all about the same kind of pool hall layabouts? Sure would like to hear what Noriega would say if there was some kind of chance in the elections for (hard-line leftists) Narciso Isa Conde or Fernando Pena. . . ."

17. Embassy's informal translation of the Assistant Secretary's speech follows.

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(begin text)

Distinguished President of the Senate Dr. Jesus Vasquez;
Distinguished President of the House of Representatives Dr.
Alfredo Pacheco;
Distinguished Senators and Representatives,
Members of the Press,
To All of You, My Friends,

It is a great honor to be allowed to speak to you today.

I will use this opportunity to speak about the policy of President Bush's administration toward the Americas. President Bush believes that the American nations are of critical importance for the security and well being of our country. He has demonstrated his commitment to the region from the first days of his administration and has articulated a clear policy that we are carrying out.

Our goal is to build an inter-American community, united by the shared values of freedom supported by the rule of law and by solid democratic institutions, driven by free trade and free investment.

Your responsibility as representatives of the Dominican people is great. Making the law is a high honor and a solemn obligation. I know, because I was for a number of years an advisor to your counterparts in the United States Congress in Washington, concentrating on strategies to improve our relations with the countries of the Americas. Our two countries work closely together in the UN, in the OAS, and in the WTO, as well as in other institutions. And soon you will be asked to ratify a bilateral Free Trade Agreement with the United States that we hope will provide lasting benefits to our two countries and to all our people.

More than just a neighbor and a friend, I come here as a brother. Although my family comes from Mexico, it is in the United States that millions of Dominicans and Mexicans have found a common home.

Yes, we share baseball, of course. But we share much more than that. Ties of blood unite us. There are more than a million Dominicans living in the United States. Even so, a piece of their heart will always remain in their native land.

And more than sixty thousand U.S. citizens live here. And many thousands of U.S. tourists come here to enjoy the warm hospitality of this beautiful country.

Let me discuss with you some of the principal aspects of our relationship.

Security

One of the principal aims we share is to make the world a safer place for our citizens and for the international community.

When terrorists attacked on September 11, there were Dominicans among the citizens of more than 80 countries who were victims. The economic effects of terrorism were felt almost immediately in the Dominican Republic.

In their actions and replies, Dominicans looked outward, taking part in subjects with global reach, pledging themselves to the openness and freedom that those terrorists attacked.

In Iraq elite Dominican troops are working with international forces.

Allow me to pay tribute to the contribution that your country has made in sending your sons to serve beside ours. To their fathers and mothers, their families and friends, on behalf of my country, I wish to say, &Thank you. Your demonstration of friendship, your sacrifice and your courage will not be forgotten.⁸

Acknowledging the role of military forces engaged in supporting the peace, our countries signed an agreement concerning Article 98 of the treaty creating the International Criminal Court. We mutually recognize the sovereign responsibility of our governments for the actions of their respective military forces. I respectfully request that you ratify this agreement as soon as it is presented to you.

Considering another aspect of security, narcotics traffickers threaten our societies and create an environment ripe for other crimes and criminals. The United States are pleased to cooperate with the Dominican Republic to make our communities safer and more secure.

Also fundamental for security is the respect for the principles of human rights. We are deeply concerned about the trafficking of persons, including across international boundaries, and especially by the completely unacceptable practice of sexual exploitation of women and children.

For our part, the United States Congress has mandated the suspension of many forms of our government assistance to countries which do not take action against trafficking in persons, and it has instructed U.S. executive directors of the international financial institutions to vote against loans to those countries.

This year you approved an excellent law against trafficking in persons and the administration has set up entities to deal with these problems. We will do everything in our power to cooperate with the Dominican authorities to help them put an end to this trafficking and to organized illegal migration, once and for all.

Democracy

Further, some words about another priority: supporting a strong, functioning democracy. I have followed with interest the preparations and debates concerning the presidential election. I see a vigorous debate about the candidates, politics, and process. This is good. It is a sign that the democratic process is working.

During my brief visit here I seek to contact all of the leading political parties to tell them that we look forward to working with the winner of the May 2004 presidential elections. Dominicans are expecting a clean, transparent election) and the country is fully capable of carrying one out. The United States shares this interest with you.

Trade

Another of our principal bilateral concerns) we are emphasizing to our partners in the region the need to conclude the negotiations on a Free Trade Area of the Americas by January, 2005.

We expect that all leaders of the region will consider the FTAA an indispensable tool for the economic and social development of their own countries. We have a moral obligation, as leaders, to make the promise of the FTAA a reality.

Free trade agreements provide greater confidence for investment and foreign direct investment accelerates economic growth. In addition, they establish transparent, well-defined rules for trade, thereby strengthening institutions and the rule of law.

The Economy

Another key point of our bilateral relationship is the participation of citizens in the making of their government's policy. You yourselves are now involved in a far reaching undertaking of this kind.

As your good friends and partners, we are all aware of the concerns your people feel: inflation, the falling value of the peso*in sum, the worries about your economic future.

One important point: the United States is not indifferent to the problems of the Dominican Republic.

There are no easy solutions for deep-rooted problems and there are no shortcuts to lasting recovery. Nevertheless, I am convinced that all the different parties in these negotiations are dedicated to developing a sustainable, healthy plan that will help the Dominican people to help themselves.

All responsible sectors of public opinion and of economic activity share the responsibility of finding a sustainable economic program.

Debate is healthy, but never-ending debate can only be harmful. The international community wants to help, and will do so. But we can do so, only once the Dominican people take the necessary agreed steps.

This program will require sacrifice and tough decisions. Your responsibility to the Dominican people is to examine immediately the proposals of the government and to vote promptly for the common good of the country.

There is no greater honor for any elected leader than putting the national interest above his own. We trust that you will carry out the responsibilities you have taken on behalf of the country, for, after all, that is why you are here.

Many Dominicans are pessimistic about the future. Many doubt that there will be any prosecution of those responsible for the banking frauds that led to the present dilemma.

It is necessary to reject this pessimism and cynicism. Yes, certainly, the finances of the Dominican economy are in great disarray. But the productive capacity of the country is healthy. Dominicans are very hard working people who love their country and want to see their laws and regulations respected.

It is here and now that Dominicans must act. And now is the time for justice to be done. The Dominican justice system must prosecute bank fraud cases all the way to their outcome,

with the rigorous, transparent application of Dominican law. These cases are too important. All of us who respect and admire the Dominican people are watching) and expecting to see the people well served and protected by their institutions and by their elected officials.

Conclusion

Distinguished friends, we share a hemisphere and a future; and none of us is ready to accept failure. What's at stake for our people is too important) the promise of democracy, economic freedom, and eradication of poverty.

I look forward with great interest to working with our friends in the hemisphere to face the challenges we have before us.

I thank you for the honor of allowing me to speak to you in this historic institution.

(end)
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